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POST-ZIONISM AND *ALIYAH*: OBSERVATIONS ON RECENT IMMIGRANTS FROM ETHIOPIA AND THE FORMER SOVIET UNION IN ISRAEL

This article examines two groups that have arrived in Israel since the 80's, Jews from Ethiopia, numbering today over 65,000, and Jews from the former Soviet Union, close to 722,000 of whom have arrived since 1989. They will most likely represent the last major immigration waves to Israel of the twentieth century. I will endeavor to show in what ways these two groups take part in Israeli society, how they have developed diverging models of ethnicity, and how they challenge certain basic foundations of Zionism[1].

The first part of this article compares assimilation processes and segregation strategies in the Ethiopian and Russian communities in Israel, by looking at features such as native language, communal organization and political involvement.

Part two focuses on the various ways of reconstructing ethnicities for the two groups in Israel, given that they are considered "identical" to the host population because of a common Jewish heritage, but have developed ways of being "different."

I attempt to show that these recent immigrants have not only reshaped contemporary Israeli society and perhaps even changed the meaning of being "Israeli," but have also challenged the assumptions and purposes of a Jewish State in the aftermath of the growing immigration of Russian Christians and

[1] The term "Ethiopians" and "Russians" follows the Hebrew usage, *etiopim* and *russim,* even though I am aware of their limitations as well as the generalization they imply, given that I am dealing with such heterogeneous groups. Ethiopian Jews originate both from Tigray and Gondar provinces and immigrated in very different conditions while the Russian immigrants are composed of Jews from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Ukraine, for example.

"Ethiopian Jewish converts." The recent immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union may well constitute the first trend in post-Zionist *alyot,* which will doubtless have implications for the Israeli State at the start of a new millennium.

I- Participating in Israel society: between assimilation and segregation

At first glance, Ethiopians and Russians in Israel appear to represent two extremes. The former is a rural illiterate population from the northern Ethiopian highlands who has maintained a strong religious and ethnic identity; the latter is a mainly urban, highly educated population, who could not always preserve religious practices under the Russian communist regime. Because of these characteristics, diverging absorption policies were applied to each group by the Israeli authorities:

- Ethiopians immigrants remained for at least one year (but often more) in an absorption center *(merkaz klita),* following an "indirect absorption." They also received special mortgages to purchase apartments and affirmative action is being enforced in some institutions of higher education. These decisions were often tainted with paternalism and ethnocentrism.

- "Direct absorption" was applied to the Russian immigrants; i.e., upon their arrival they received an "absorption basket" *(sa'al klita)* which included an allowance for living costs, rental and mortgage subsidies, and educational expenses (for children). This enabled them to make use of this money to find housing, purchase goods and basically survive on their own, instead of the government managing their needs. This policy was assumed to increase the immigrant's choice in terms of where s/he wanted to live and freedom as regards how this financial assistance is managed (S. Adier, 1998). Although they received these benefits, Russians were not treated with the "positive discrimination" reserved for the Ethiopians, especially in the area of housing[2].

Furthermore, the presence of a community of *vatikim* (veteran immigrants) from the USSR as well as from Ethiopia, who had set up communal structures, helped the newcomers upon arrival and eased their absorption process. Do these different integration dynamics suggest that each group will participate

[2] I am only referring here to the recent wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who began to arrive in 1989, and not to the first immigration of the 70's, whose socio-demographic features and motivations were vastly different and whose absorption was also handled differently, cf. S. Adier (1998).

differently in Israeli polity and social life?

Native language Status

Both Russian and Amharic show signs of ethnolinguistic vitality in Israel, as exemplified in the media (TV, radio, press), circulation of videotapes and music cassettes from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union, and certain educational frameworks (e.g. Russian classes, an Amharic language test for the matriculation exam). In particular, the development of a Russian-language press, numbering some 50 newspapers and magazines, constitutes one of the most important features characterizing this immigration (N. Zilberg, 1996). These enable the older generation to maintain their native language, which results in segregated speech communities. Ethiopian youngsters all speak Hebrew among themselves, whereas young people from the former Soviet Union prefer to use Russian, even though they learn Hebrew successfully (E. Ben-Rafael et al. 1998). This is probably due to the fact that their Russian cultural, social and linguistic identity still prevails.

Communal organization

Both groups have tight networks of associations and organizations that help the community members, defend their rights, and encourage collective action. Concurrently, a class of new leaders has emerged. The number of Ethiopian associations has skyrocketed to nearly 100, set up by young leaders who skillfully stage strikes and demonstrations (such as the one directed against the Rabbinate in 1985 or in response to the blood scandal in 1996). Among the Jews from the former Soviet Union, approximately 35 associations exist. Each community has an umbrella organization, which is either the Zionist Forum of Soviet Jewry or the United Ethiopian Jewish Organization. In this sense, Russian and Ethiopian Jews, who lacked any communal structure or community leaders in their countries of origin, are now organized as a community that can bring about group mobilization at each new crisis.

Political involvement

Both immigrant groups were highly visible in the last elections (1996) and their needs were also taken into account in the Israeli political platforms. However, each group chose a different political forum:

The Russians established their own political party *(Israel b'Aliyah)* of which two candidates were appointed to key positions in the current government: Nathan Sharansky, was named Minister of Commerce & Industry, and Yuli

Edelstein, Minister of Immigration & Absorption[3].

The Ethiopians, on the other hand, preferred to cast their votes mainly for the national-religious parties, at the right of the political spectrum, even though the first Ethiopian to become a Member of the Knesset, Addisu Messale, was elected on the Labor *(Avoda)* list.

These patterns are informative as to ethnicity in politics. On the basis of E. Ben-Rafael's (1982) classification of former immigrant waves, Russians can be classified as a "for-itself" group, developing a community of interests and a political consciousness, thus institutionalizing ethnicity in the polity. On the other hand, the Ethiopians form an "in-itself" group, unwilling to articulate an ethnic political ticket, leading to their marginalization in the political sphere. However, both groups demonstrated that they were at the center of power, and not at its periphery, and that they weigh heavily on government policies and national decision-making.

Despite the dissimilarities between Ethiopians and Russians, both groups use the same methods of involvement in Israeli society to simultaneously maintain segregation and pursue assimilation[4]. In other words, from the point of view of native language, communal organization and political involvement, the two groups view themselves as ethnic communities (which was never the case before) and are perceived by the Israelis as such. Nevertheless, these are also the very strategies allowing them to fully enter Israeli society. In sum, by behaving as "ethnics," they are becoming Israelis. However, while these patterns of participating "ethnically" in Israeli society demonstrate that Russians and Ethiopians wish to form separate communities, how does this affect the interplay between formations of Israeli identity and ethnic identity?

II- Choosing new models of ethnicity

In the Israel of the 90's there are various ways of negotiating and reconstructing ethnicities. Emphasis here will be on development of self concept and representations of the Other as they are reformulated by the Ethiopian Jews and the Jews from the former Soviet Union when faced with their "other-self", i.e. the Israeli Jew, deemed "identical" in theory but very "different" in practice.

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[3] Reflecting the reality of the immigrant population today, an Israeli of Ethiopian origin was made Vice-Minister of Immigration and Absorption.

[4] In fact, cultural assimilation and heightened ethnicity are quite compatible trends as shown in various studies of immigrant groups in Israel in the 80's cf. A. Weingrod (1985).

The myth of the melting pot

Over the last several decades, the melting-pot model of immigrant "absorption" in Israel has been challenged, mainly due to two factors. First, the Zionist ideal of the fusion of exiles *(mizug galuyot)* into a homogenous society with one national and cultural identity (i.e. that of the "Jewish people") has failed, since the gap between the "two Israels" has in fact widened. Secondly, the *olim* of today, as opposed to those of the 50's and 60's, are no longer willing to give up their ethnic specificities. Therefore, today's immigrants fully participate in Israeli life without the resocialization required in the 50's, as new patterns of ethnic legitimation insure membership in Israeli society, leading to an era of cultural pluralism (E. Cohen, 1983). In the past, most immigrant groups aspired to assimilate as quickly as they could and become "Israelis." Today, recent immigrants tend to strive to remain "ethnics" as long as they can. In this case, then, what are the signs of Otherness? How are the boundaries of the group redefined? How do these "new ethnicities" co-exist with national Israeli identity?

Ethiopian Jews' identification with a Black transnational culture

In conjunction with secularization and modernity, Ethiopian Jews are growing more aware of their black identity among the white host population, in a way re-discovering their blackness or their *negritude (*L. Anteby, 1997). For instance, in both the political arena and the media, there are new political uses of the term "blackness" and references to the language of racial relations, usually to condemn Israeli policies as "discrimination" or "racism." This reformulation of ethnicity is also apparent among a minority of the youth who adopt Afro-American models and international black symbols (in their music, hairstyle, and clothing). Frequent trips to Addis Ababa and its urban African culture also account for this forging of a new collective identity. This trend may very well represent a means of negotiating their blackness in a white Jewish Israeli society.

Russian Jews' association with "high culture"

The immigrants from the former Soviet Union continue to transmit and re-create Russian culture and language, especially since it is the only means for the intellectual elite, the *intelligentsia,* to maintain any kind of identity[5]. A new community of "Russian-speaking Jews in Israel" has developed who wish to maintain an image of elitists and cosmopolitans (D. Storper Perez, 1998). In fact

[5] B. Kimmerling calls this group "Russian-speaking immigrants" and considers them primarily as a linguistic-cultural group rather than an ethnic group *per se* (1998: 270).

they view themselves as belonging to a "high culture," seen as superior to both Western culture and even to Israeli culture, dismissed as "Oriental" (B. Kimmerling, 1998. Russian-language media plays a major role in creating this trend, as do numerous ties with the homeland and with Russian Jews in New York or Berlin. This new "Russian ethnicity" and culture have become a mode of identification, even among youth, and is interpreted by Israelis as ghettoization and cultural separatism.

Being an oleh *in a global world*

These two examples suggest that one set of determinants making up personal identity derive from the country of origin. Immigrants still maintain strong bonds through modern media and travel. In some cases, such as the Russian immigrants, immigrants still actively participate in their former society. These transnational networks and cultural flows allow for a circulation of commodities and people, books and images, music and food between Israel and Ethiopia or the Russian communities in Germany, the United States, and the former Soviet Union. The second set of determinants derives from more global models, conveyed by modern media such as cable TV and music culture. This has enabled a certain number of Ethiopian immigrants to feel that they belong to a new "imagined community" of Blacks around the world.

Thus people can live in Israel today and still be "Russian" or Ethiopian" in addition to the other identities they choose. New ethnic options, such as identifying as "blacks" or associating with "high culture" may perhaps become the main features of the immigrants' "visibility" and their principal strategies of differentiation from the host population. Nonetheless, the interplay between the local Israeli context, the former society of origin, and the global dimension of "world culture" should not be interpreted as a sign of the failure of their absorption. On the contrary, I would suggest that these trends may well represent a new form of participation in Israeli society, which combines Israeli and global identities. The immigrants' success in integrating into global culture may simply prove they have integrated into Israeli culture, thus confirming that they may truly be post-modern before their time.

III- Challenging the Zionist goal

The new twists the immigrants add to the meaning of "being an Israeli" also entail a reformulation of Israeli identity, and thus inevitably of Jewish identity itself. In other words, are these immigrant groups also defining new modes of "being a Jew"?

In fact, both immigrants from Ethiopia and from the former Soviet Union

face difficulties in defining their personal status as Jews. Their arrival has rekindled the eternal debate on "who is a Jew?" which has taken on a new dimension in light of the high percentage of Russian Christian immigrants and of the controversy over the "Ethiopian Jewish converts", otherwise known as Falash Mura. These "marginal groups" challenge the very text of the Law of Return and the Zionist goal itself.

The text of the Law of Return, adopted in 1950, stipulates that "any Jew has the right to immigrate to Israel". The 1970 amendment to the Law of Return extends this right to family members of a Jew, who can benefit from the rights given to a Jew, provided they have not converted to another religion:

> - article 4 (a). The rights of close kin
>
> The rights of a Jew according to the present law, the rights of the Oleh according to the 1952 law on nationality, as well as the rights of the Oleh according to any legislation that may be, are also granted to the child and the grandchild of a Jew, to the spouse of a Jew, to the spouse of the child or the grandchild of a Jew, except a person who was a Jew and willingly converted to another religion.
>
> - article 4 (b). Definition
>
> For the purpose of this law, a "Jew" means a person born to a Jewish mother or who has converted to Judaism, and who is not a member of another religion.

Therefore, offspring of mixed marriages and descendants of Jews, who might all be Christians, are allowed to immigrate to Israel under the law of Return *(hoq hashuout)*. Nonetheless, membership in "another religion" is sufficient to nullify the ancestral rights by virtue of Jewish descent, thus annulling the right of these individuals to immigrate according to the Law of Return. Since the "Jew" receives a secular definition in the Law of Return rather than a strictly Halakhic one, the extension of this Law to certain non-Jews brings up the question of the right of Return for descendants of apostates. For example, according to Jewish Law *(Halakhah)*, apostasy does not put an end to Jewish affiliation, whereas under the Law of Return, descendants of apostates are not considered eligible for immigration[6]. Few immigrant groups in the past have challenged this ruling but the recent immigration from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union, which includes former Christians or even practicing Christians, have once again

[6] For a discussion on this topic, see M. Corinaldi (1998: 35-45).

brought these dilemmas to the fore[7].

The Russian Christian immigrants

The Russian immigrants as a whole are generally considered to be a "Jewish community", but in the latest immigration wave (since 1989) an increasing number of non-Jews are also entering Israel. These may be spouses of Jews, given the high number of mixed marriages in the former Soviet Union, as well as family members of a non-Jewish spouse. However, there is also a minority of Soviet Jews who converted to Christianity in the 60's and 70's, a phenomenon that seems to be restricted to certain urban centers (Moscow and Leningrad), mostly among the *intelligentsia.* One of the most well known examples of this is Father Mann, a priest of Jewish origin who converted to Christianity and leads a Church in the former Soviet-Union, mainly attended by other converts. An additional problem that also contributes to inflating the figures concerning non-Jewish Russians relates to their personal status in terms of Jewish Law, since it is estimated that 27 % of Russian immigrants to Israel are not considered Jews according to Halakhah. Because Jews in the Soviet Union could not perform some religious prescriptions (in terms of marriage, divorce, circumcisions), the Israeli Rabbinate has ruled that some of the *olim* or their children must undergo a conversion ceremony in order to be able to marry in Israel or to prevent a child from being regarded as a *mamzer* in the eyes of the religious authorities[8].

The Falash Mura

The entire community of Ethiopian Jews was recognized in 1975 as descendants of the tribe of Dan, and thus considered as "full-fledged Jews" who could benefit from the Law of Return. However, because the code of Jewish law *(Halakhah)* was unknown in Ethiopia, marriage, divorce and conversions were not performed according to normative Judaism and some individuals still

[7] The famous case of the late Brother Daniel Rufeisen challenged this law when he claimed Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return as a Jew (by birth), even though he had converted to Christianity. The Israeli Supreme Court ruled (on Dec. 6th 1962) that the Law of Return, being a secular law, should be interpreted according to secular criteria. This resulted in a strange paradox: despite the fact that in the eyes of the Halakha, a Jew, even converted, remains a Jew, in the secular interpretation mentioned, Brother Daniel was not recognized as a Jew, and therefore could not benefit from the Law of Return (C. Klein, 1977: 43).

[8] According to Jewish law, a *marmer,* or illicit child, is the offspring of an "adulterous" mother, such as a woman who has not obtained a religious divorce before having children with another man.

undergo ritual immersion before marrying in Israel[9].

The Falash Mura, on the other hand, are Christian Ethiopians of Jewish descent who form a large community of converts, their number ranging from 30,000 to 250,000. Although conversions had taken place for centuries, a group of "Falasha Christians", known today as Falash Mura only emerged in the 19th century. Some converted to Christianity under the influence of European Protestant missionaries while others assimilated into the dominant Amhara population, becoming members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Kaplan, 1993). Nonetheless, none of these conversions were forced conversions but rather stemmed from personal choices to have educational opportunities or to achieve higher social and economic status. The converts continued to be regarded as ethnically different by the Christian Ethiopians at the same time as they maintained links with family members who remained Jewish.

In 1991, when 14,000 Ethiopian immigrants were airlifted to Israel in the dramatic "Operation Solomon", only a few Falash Mura were among them. Since then, their right to immigrate has been a subject of controversy. In 1993, an Inter-Ministerial Committee – known as the "Tsaban Committee" – examined the case of the Falash Mura, but saw no possibility of granting them the privileges of the Law of Return as a group since they were deemed "members of another religion." In the eyes of the committee, their continued practice of Christianity defined them as "free-will converts." However, on humanitarian grounds, it was recommended that they be reunited with first-degree relatives. Most of them have close family in Israel and since mid-1993 they have been entering the country on the basis of family reunification under the Law of Entry *(hoq haknisa)* and not the Law of Return *(hoq hashvout)* only applied to those recognized as Jews[10]. Upon arrival, they follow a three-week "return to Judaism" course *(ha'shava le yahadout)* and are formally converted. By Rabbinical standards, as apostates reconverting "back" to Judaism, they are treated as repentants and not as converted gentiles. They thus undergo a shortened rabbinical process of reconversion (including re-circumcision, ritual immersion and acceptance of the commandments in the presence of three rabbis acting as a religious court, a *bet-din rabbani*)[11].

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[9] Up to 1985, a longer form of symbolic conversion *(giyur le-humra),* including re-circumcision *(hatafat dam brit),* ritual immersion and acceptance of the commandments was required to remove any doubt concerning the personal status of Ethiopian immigrants.

[10] As of June 1998, over 7,000 Falash Mura have entered Israel.

[11] Cf. M. Corinaldi (1998: 136-139).

The presence of these immigrants in the midst of the *olim* serves to illustrate that the boundaries of Jewishness and the limits of who has the right to immigrate are being extended. This is resulting in a broader definition of who is a Jew and by extension who will become an Israeli (or at least who will be living in Israel as an Israeli). In fact, these groups on the fringes of Judaism are redefining Ole contours of Israeli society by widening its borders, a first step towards normalcy, and perhaps post-Zionism.

Conclusion

Both the crumbling Zionist ideology in Israel itself as well as the characteristics of the Russian and Ethiopian immigrants (i.e. the social and political ways they take part in Israeli society, the ethnic options they choose in relation to global identities, and the fact they are not always halakhic Jews) account for some of these new patterns in Israeli society and identity. These "New Israelis" are developing distinct cultures and identities, which constitute quasi-autonomous entities; they have developed symbolic separations (low rate of intermarriage, segregated housing, different languages, different lifestyles) that challenge the very definition of "Israeli culture" and "Israeli identity" (B. Kimmerling, 1998: 264-265). This trend also undermines the "cultural and hegemonic domination" of the Zionist State, because ethnic particularities are emphasized.

Can these immigrants be defined as post-modern *olim*? Although they have taken on a new Israeli identity, their immigration has also enabled them to construct new ethnicities and new forms of identification that are not connected to Israel or to the Zionist model (but rather to the US or to urban Africa). In this sense, they are combining different cultural references and multiple identities, a definite component of post-modernism.

Can these immigrants be defined as post-Zionist *olim*? In fact, there has been an ideological shift in Israel and several researchers have claimed that the country is becoming a post-Zionist society, since the goals of Zionism are no longer being fulfilled. The "post-Zionization" of society, as U. Ram (1998) sees it, is expressed in the diversification of the collective ideology and the broadening of the limits of membership in Israeli society. This, of course, undermines the very meaning of *aliyah*: for what does it mean to be an *oleh* in a post-Zionist era?

Can these immigrants be defined simply as migrants as in any other Western country? In this case, *aliyah* ("ascension") is on the way to becoming *hagira*

(immigration), if this has not already happened[12]. The issue of the integration of the non-Jewish Russians or Ethiopians also raises the question of what it means for Israeli society to deal with migrants instead of *olim.* This would attest to the normalization of the country, making Israel a country of immigration like most Western countries (Berthomière, 1996).

These questions remain open, as do the implications of these diverging definitions of the immigrants for the boundaries of Israeli society in the future and for Jewish identity in Israel.

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[12] There are already an estimated 150,000 foreign workers in Israel (approximately half of whom are illegal) originating from Rumania, Thailand, West Africa and the Philippines.

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